

Peleus and Thetis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Catullus 64

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In the short 'Peleus and Thetis' episode of *Metamorphoses* Book 11, Ovid combines two of his favourite themes, sex and shape-changing. The beautiful goddess Thetis has caught Jupiter's eye; but he has heard a prophecy told to Thetis by Proteus that she is destined to bear a son who will be greater than his father, and so he palms her off on his mortal grandson Peleus instead. Peleus is only too ready to oblige, and approaches Thetis as she rests in a cave. Finding that his seductive entreaties are getting him nowhere, though, he attempts to rape her. Thetis, however, has the power to change shape, and she turns into first a bird, then a tree, then a tigress; whereupon Peleus, terrified, releases her from his grasp. Having taken advice from the shape-shifting god par excellence, Proteus, Peleus discovers that in order to have his way with Thetis, he must tie her up with ropes, and cling to her whatever shape she changes into. So, successful at last, Peleus manages to have sex with Thetis. The son she conceives will be turn out to be the great hero Achilles.

Ovid sets the encounter against an idyllic backdrop: a secluded cave by a perfect sea where nature and art seem to conspire to make an impossibly beautiful place. The ensuing scene is far from peaceful, though, and the bizarre struggle and final rape contrast starkly with the seaweed-strewn shore and double-coloured myrtle berries (though the reference to myrtle, Venus' sacred plant, does indeed hint at the erotic events to follow). In this lovely place, the tension inherent in the myth between romance and violence becomes apparent. Peleus is described as 'lucky in [or perhaps 'happy with'] his wife', which perhaps reminds us of the traditional view (which Ovid quite definitely does not present) of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis as a blissful occasion when men and gods were joined in celebration. Yet Thetis has to be tied down, forced into this 'blessed' union, and, as we may well remember from the *Iliad*, she soon returns to the sea, leaving her husband in Phthia.

Interestingly, there is an extra player in this episode: Proteus. It is he who first tells Thetis that she will bear such a great son, contrary to the usual mythical tradition which gives the prophecy to Themis. Then he is the one who advises Peleus on the best method to use to capture Thetis as she shifts shape. Proteus is himself famous (since Homer's *Odyssey*) for his ability to change forms, but he also shows himself to be changeable, even two-faced, in his relationships. His encouragement of Thetis to bear a child seems, at least on the surface, to be well-meaning enough. Indeed, Proteus here even sounds a little like a father figure (rather like Peneus in Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*, who urges his daughter Daphne to produce grandsons for him). Yet only thirty lines later, he appears to be on Peleus' side, giving the hero a sure-fire way to rape the beleaguered goddess. As an added irony, Ovid toys with his readers' knowledge of a famous literary precedent. Proteus is here giving the very instructions that, in Vergil's *Georgics*, were given by the nymph Cyrene to Aristaeus when he wanted to pin down ... Proteus! Is this just a little joke on Ovid's part? Or can we see a certain vindictiveness in Proteus' behaviour here, as he makes another suffer the indignity to which he was once subjected?

Let us rewind now, to a time fifty years earlier. Catullus' poem 64, an 'epyllion' (or 'mini-epic') approaches the myth from a very different angle. There is no hint here of rape, no cataloguing of the shape changes the goddess undergoes. Rather, we are, at least at first, given a tale of perfect love. As should be obvious from the discussion above, this is only one of a number of possible approaches to this myth; and Ovid seems, in part, to be reacting to the Catullan version when he places such emphasis in the *Metamorphoses* on Thetis' reluctance.

Catullus jumbles up or even ignores elements found in the myth's more traditional form. First of all, he stages the meeting between the goddess and the hero at sea, while Peleus is voyaging with Jason on the Argo. Conventional chronology puts the voyage of the Argonauts after the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; the couple are estranged by the time Peleus embarks on this adventure, and when they meet again, relations are hardly cordial. Catullus completely reverses the situation, and so makes the tone radically different, full of hope and passion as Peleus sees Thetis emerging topless above the waves and instantly falls madly in love with her. This, it seems, is a case of love at first sight, and an expression of the possibility for harmony and proximity between gods and men: 'Then it is said that Peleus was on fire for Thetis, / Then Thetis did not disdain marriage with a mortal, / Then father Jupiter himself realised that Peleus must be joined with Thetis.' Here we can see delicate hints of Jupiter's need to ensure that this marriage takes place, yet the reason is not directly stated. The impression is less that this is a union brought about by necessity than that Jupiter and the other gods are graciously indulging Peleus and Thetis' love for each other. Peleus is, therefore, not a substitute brought in to avoid divine difficulties, but the most blessed of heroes given the most beautiful of the Nereids to marry. And the bride comes to her couch without a fight (very like the traditional Roman bride Catullus describes in poem 61).

Still, Catullus' poem is far from being a simplified, cleaned up version of the myth: indeed, the very suppression of these well-known elements of the story makes the whole affair much more complicated, inviting the reader to ponder the omissions of the story. Another layer of complexity comes from the description of the design woven into the quilt on Peleus and Thetis' bridal couch, which takes up a good half of the poem. This tells the story of Ariadne, deserted by her lover Theseus and later married to Bacchus. Can we ignore the negative implications in the presence of a story of a hero's faithlessness within the frame (or at least on the duvet) of another story where heroes have just been praised and idealised?

Memories, hints of the darker side of the myth persist as the Ariadne digression ends, and the description of the wedding continues. Despite the much-trumpeted idea that this occasion marks a union between the divine and the human, it is made clear that in fact the human and divine wedding guests do not mingle: the Thessalian men leave before the gods turn up with their gifts. And one of the divine wedding guests, arriving just before Jupiter, is Prometheus, still bearing the scars from the time he spent chained to a rock, clawed by Jupiter's eagle. In the tragedy *Prometheus Bound* (written perhaps by Aeschylus), he was the one who made the prophecy that Thetis would bear a child destined to be greater than his father – and he expressed the hope

that Jupiter would be overcome by lust, sleep with Thetis, and so get his comeuppance. Furthermore, there are some curious absentees from the guest-list. It is stated that all the gods came to the wedding, except Apollo and Diana: no reason is given, but we might assume that it is because Peleus and Thetis' son Achilles will go on to be the scourge of their beloved Troy.

Then the wedding song, which initially celebrates the great love of the newly married couple and the fact that their marriage will be fertile and productive, degenerates into more of a dirge, morbidly obsessed with the slaughter that Achilles will perpetrate at Troy, felling bodies like a harvester, clogging the river with blood and gore. Even in death, the Fates sing, he will cause more death, as the virgin Polyxena is sacrificed over his tomb. The epilogue of poem 64, praising heroes again, and lamenting that now the time has passed when the gods thought humans pure enough to be their companions, rings rather hollow. Little of the happiness and optimism with which the poem began survives to the end.

Catullus' treatment of the myth is longer and arguably more complex than Ovid's, but both poets share an interest in exploring the tensions between the conventional version of the myth and their own, between the idea of the blessed union and the fact that the marriage was forced on Thetis, and between joy at the thought of the future greatness of Achilles and the knowledge he will hasten Troy's destruction before himself dying young.

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